

## CANVAS SUPPORT AS MATERIALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS-PEDAGOGIC PROPAGANDA

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### ABSTRACT

In Portugal, over the centuries, religion used painting on canvas to evoke its sacred mysteries. Despite paintings are primarily pictorial, their back can reveal a lot about their contribute for the religious-pedagogic propaganda of the Catholic Church. Based on a interdisciplinary collaboration among art history, conservation, science and on the topic of the material and technology of the weaved support in the Portuguese painting, this paper focuses on how canvas appears to be an exceptional medium for visual materialization of such power and glory.

**Keywords:** canvas support, religious painting, religious-pedagogic propaganda, weaved structure.

### INTRODUCTION

Religion, whose Latin etymology *religare* highlights the role of gathering, tying and binding, has long been recognized as deeply related to art. Over the centuries, religion used painting, as a means of bringing the believer to God. Painting, on its weaved form, gathers an exceptional sensory, emotional and intellectual vehicle for those who want to achieve spirituality [1]. In fact, the words “text” and “textile” both derive from the Latin *texere*, to weave [2]. And weaving can function as a metaphor for many aspects of life, including the religious one. Thus, Christianity, which became the predominant power influencing European culture, after classical antiquity, inspired artists and patrons to evoke the nature of these sacred mysteries in visual terms. One of these terms was painting on canvas [1].

Despite paintings are primarily pictorial and, consequently, the image is the starting point, the back of it can reveal a lot about its history and function. But what sort of information can be derived from the back of it when dealing with art and religion? Our paper presents results of an interdisciplinary collaboration among art history, conservation, and science on the topic of the material and technology of the weaved support in the Portuguese painting, since its implementation to industrial production. The particularities of the fabric support used, its dimensions, and whether it is framed, suspended or rolled may help in the interpretation of religious artwork. And it also may enhance the relationship between religion and art. Therefore, in this article,

we show, through this comparative study of canvas supports, how it strongly contributed for the religious-pedagogic propaganda of the Portuguese Catholic Church.

### OPERATIONAL GOALS

#### The use of canvas support in Portuguese religious painting

In Portugal, by the late sixteenth century, artists began to replace panel to canvas support for oil painting. The cultural circles embraced the Italian art solutions, while not ignoring the artistic influences from Flanders or Spain. Also through the cultural sponsorship, the exchange of artists was motivated, allowing the sharing of experiences, knowledge and documents between Portuguese and foreign artists [1]. The replacement of tempera by oil was driven by technical and expressive possibilities afforded by oil and the canvas support. Dynamic and flexible, they were able to translate a new notion of space, with strong dramatic intensity, typical from the new modern conscience [3]. Nevertheless, paintings were already executed on textile supports during the later Middle Age [4]. Indeed, painting on wood and textiles could even be carried out in the same workshop, but relatively few have survived. The demand increased due to changes to liturgical practice and an upsurge of religious fervour [5]. These early works were practiced for the making of banners, hangings, altarpieces, palls and painting on linen [6], and most likely they were not envisaged as ephemeral objects [4]. Treatises of the period such as Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte* (c. 1390) or



the Manuscripts of Jean Le Begue reveal that this practice, principally on linen, but also on silk, was already widespread [6].

Since the transubstantiation was an instrument of special reorganization of Christianity, the ceremony was an extraordinary ritual, surrounded by the highest mystery and solemnity [7]. The place of celebration became the place with the real presence of Christ, which came greatly solemnize the memory space and community meeting of Christianity [7]. Gradually, the painted textile support replaced the murals, the heavy panels, the costly tapestries and embroidered pieces [3]. Larger sizes, portability, and versatility for religious objects constituted a strong justification for the emerging of fabric as a painting support [Tab.1]. In Portugal, few of these early works survived, partly due to their delicate and vulnerable medium of glue-size. An example is the coarse plain linen cloth altar representing *Our Lady of Rosary*, from the Machado de Castro National Museum, Coimbra.

Thereby, due to fabric's versatility, scenarios of new experiences for the use of it could be more open - the procession - or closed - the private chapel, the convent, the cloister [7]. For instance, the oldest Portuguese oil painting on canvas is, in fact, a portable banner of *Our Lady of Misericord* (c. 1555-60), painted by Francisco de Campos and belonging to the *Misericórdia of Alcochete* [8]. Founded in the sixteenth century and still in activity, this brotherhood have on its fabric banner the gregarious symbol of Mary's protective mantle covering the whole society. Along the centuries and during its annual processions, banners like this are a way of marking urban places as sacred, during the Holy Week.

In fact, the fabric support has been employed in multiple ways whether stretched or hanging, or created to be used as processional or as a fixed element [5].

After the Counter-reform, the art of painting served, as never before, the dogmatic purpose of the decorous precept of *nihil profanum, nihil inhonestum* (nothing profane, nothing dishonest) [9]. From the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, the centralized power of Catholic Church promoted the evolution of a pious and devotion art painting to an apotheosis and strong theatrical content. Allied to the technical and expressive possibilities of the oil, which allowed working more freely, larger canvases were increasingly used. They materialize the national interpretation of the

Council of Trent (1525-1563) principles and are intrinsically associate with the introduction of the Eucharistic throne in Portugal [13]. Through these large paintings, the church reinforces the image of strong and glorious institution. The support appears to be therefore an exceptional medium for visual materialization of such power and glory, especially when integrated into architectural space [1].

## OUTCOMES

### Manufacturing history and religious-pedagogic propaganda

During Middle Age, important technological innovations were carried out in the field of textile manufacture. One of them was the horizontal loom of pedals [10]. It had the big advantage, compared to the vertical loom, of weaving more cloth in a higher speed. Curiously, one of the oldest traces of a horizontal loom known was found in Portugal, in the archaeological ruins of Conimbriga [11].

In the traditional loom, the warp yarns are set up along the length of the fabric with transverse weft yarns at right angles. Plain and twill weaves are the two most commonly found in Portuguese canvas paintings, whether in fine or coarse canvas. Their weave geometry plays a major role in the fabric, as the density of yarns, in each direction, influences fabric's behavior and, therefore, of the painting [5]. In a plain weave picks and ends of weft and warp yarns pass alternately under and over each other, creating a homogeneous pattern. When the warp yarn or the weft goes over some threads, whose interweaving makes a diagonal, a twill weave is create.

The establishment of broader looms allowed larger fabrics and more complex patterns. Since these required a time-consuming process to set-up each pattern, they were more prized and expensive [5]. The more complex damask patterns were manufactured for purposes such as ceremonial use. Because twill and diaper fabrics were invested with religious meaning and were also expensive, it is not impossible to think them as being chosen as high-quality painting supports [5]. Symbolic, pragmatic and aesthetic significances may have therefore determined their selection, as it seems to have happened with the religious work attributed to Francisco Correia (1568-1616) on linen fabric with diamond shape damask weave whose undulating texture is evident through the paint.

Also in the larger altar paintings from seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the weaving loom



limitation on the fabric width was surmounted by sewing canvases together. Ancient and overcast seams appear to have been the most widely practiced, and a trend towards coarser canvases has been observed for larger works.

Regarding the constituent materials, in the pre-industrial period, linen was the main fabric for religious paintings, but also hemp and ramie were used, as it happened with Bento Coelho da Silveira's (1617-1708) paintings [12].

Furthermore, in the study of the religious Portuguese canvases, in addition to visual assessment, observation by optical microscope is being carried out, for the identification of fibre morphology, through longitudinal view and cross section.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is a fact that paintings are primarily pictorial. Nevertheless, their back can reveal a lot about their contribute to the religious-pedagogic propaganda of the Catholic Church. In Portugal, this strong relationship between religion and art was implemented allong the centuries. Product of transubstantiation and later based on the counter-reform, the weaved support was used as an excepcional medium for visual materialization of religious power and glory. The development of textile technical and material aspects allowed to invest fabrics with religious meaning. Symbolic, pragmatic and aesthetic significances may determined therefore their selection since they represent an important way to evoke the nature of the sacred mysterious of the Portuguese Catholic Church.

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Reasons for the preference for canvas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convenience, as it weighed less, was flexible and easily transportable;</li> <li>• Greater ease of handling;</li> <li>• Greater ease of application to the intended function;</li> <li>• Portability, facilitating the transportation and exportation;</li> <li>• Adequacy several occasions either religious or civil;</li> <li>• Versatility of functions: one piece procession could be used / exposed, throughout the year, in the Church;</li> <li>• Ease of large-scale production, stimulating trade in small sizes, which are sold in bulk at low prices;</li> <li>• Possibility of large dimensions, by joining seams for presenting continuous surfaces and less weight;</li> <li>• More flexibility and ease of housekeeping: parts of certain ceremonies could be stored rolled or folded;</li> <li>• Speed of execution: a piece of altar painted cloth would be potentially cheaper, lighter and faster than painting on wood;</li> <li>• In principle, cheaper than tapestries and embroideries;</li> <li>• Flexibility and three-dimensionality of the screen allow a more vibrant painting;</li> <li>• The texture that gave the painting met the new artistic taste.</li> <li>• Durability: preservation for the future, when painted in oil, unlike tempera on canvas.</li> </ul>

Table 1 – Preference of weaved canvas support for painting.